

Baker, John Calhoun
Convocation address

LD
4241
Az
1946
March

The Days Ahead

by

John C. Baker

Commencement Address Delivered at

The Ohio State University

March 15, 1946

The Days Ahead

Today you graduate from a great university. Some of you will continue formal training, but the majority tomorrow will step into a rapidly changing world and start playing an active part in life. Is it to be an insignificant or an important role? In my brief talk about "The Days Ahead," I do not plan to stress the road to personal success in your own chosen field, whether teaching, engineering, business, medicine, or whatnot. You are well prepared to make great technical contributions in these areas. Recent history eloquently supports this conclusion. What I want to urge is the need for careful consideration of and attention to those conditions in the world today which may completely rob you of your birthright--your opportunity to make those creative contributions which every educated person should make. I want to warn you against winning the battle and losing the war.

Tuesday, August 14, 1945, throughout time will be a momentous date--on that day, peace in some form at least, began to be restored, and almost simultaneously we turned from the simple but desperate objective of winning the war to new problems of tremendous significance, not least among which is winning the peace. The history of the human race for many generations will, in the next few years, be shaped by us--by you and by me--and by our allies. This is a very great task. What should we work for in the days ahead? To answer this will be the theme of my talk.

The challenge implicit in this question for the days ahead sobers me so much that I cannot help but think of our great victories as only introductory accomplishments. The record of history indicates that man's thinking and actions up to the present time have led to wars of increasing intensity. If ever there was a time to question the cynical belief "we always had wars and always will," it is now. When a single bomb can destroy an entire city--

when no line can be drawn between military personnel and civilians--much thinking becomes imperative. The old roads can no longer be followed in safety.

A significant proposition, too often forgotten, is that the conditions existing in any nation will have much to do with forming the attitudes of the peoples of that nation and the action they take on any issue--in other words, world history will be written to a large extent by the conditions which we help to bring about, not simply by the faith we profess. Few people will disagree with the statement that conditions in Germany led directly to Hitler. It is essential, therefore, that we must attempt to develop conditions conducive to peace and the kind of world we desire. Any acceptance of this general premise immediately brings up the question, "What are the conditions in the world today that vitally affect the future--your future?"

As students of current history you know many of them. May I summarize a few:

1. The allied nations have been completely victorious in the most destructive war in history. Our enemies are now powerless before us, and we bear the full responsibility for planning the future of the world.
2. We and our allies are not in the same state of economic development, do not agree on political theories. We were forced together more by fear of defeat than by common bonds and interests.
3. We are discussing the re-education of defeated enemies, with no experience at such a task, and with a concept of education apparently restricted to text books and teachers. Formal education can never alone compete with two other strong means of

education--experience and example.

4. The day of complete independence of action by small nations has, in my opinion, disappeared.
5. Force alone is the philosophy recognized by many as the only answer to most of our big problems.
6. Attempts are being made at least on the surface to develop a working world government among nations; and for such a scheme to be effective, deep changes in our pattern of thinking must occur.
7. Tentative attempts at peace-making suggest ruthless primitive treaties rather than understanding and conciliatory ones leading to conditions which will make peace possible and avoid, rather than breed, wars.
8. It is now clear, contrary to the opinion of many economists and political leaders, that the industrial revolution has not run its course; our industrial society is not so mature as many thought. Indeed, scientific developments have been greatly accelerated by the war, and with these came the realization that national safety lies, to a greater extent than ever before, in scientific, administrative, and productive leadership.

Equally disturbing is the domestic situation. Unemployment or the fear of it looms large in the minds of all. Intolerance is everywhere, and class strife has rapidly developed in recent years. Many individuals are forgetting their duties as citizens. These problems, both national and international, are by no means inclusive, and suggest a world on the verge of chaos. Constructive solutions will not come from well wishing; they can come only from the work of many in all nations and an overpowering desire for a decent world and a willingness to live and let live.

A second proposition of great significance to you as you start your career is the country in which you live. We all forget and accept this too lightly. The United States--our country--a constitutional democracy--is, I believe, with all of its faults, the finest form of government yet devised by man. Inherently it recognizes the dignity of man and that rulers and government are to serve citizens, however lowly. This form of government requires much more from you--from all of us-- than most realize. Indeed, it demands more than any other type of government--not in the way of taxes and personal sacrifices, but in spiritual values. It assumes that, if it is to succeed, the majority of its citizens will be honest, fair-minded, and willing to put public welfare ahead of petty, personal gains of any sort and that citizens will accept great personal responsibility. There are certain thinkers who from time to time lose faith in democracy, and who, because of the confusion now existing in the world, feel that it is too unwieldy to function in the present rapidly changing times. In my opinion, just the opposite is true. Democracy can be indicted for being cumbersome and slow, but it may be the only society which can endure in the present day world because it is adaptable and because it relies on a strong, independent and loyal citizenry, who in themselves are responsible for the success of their society. There is considerable evidence to support this point of view.

Present conditions, particularly in this country, are indeed ones which will require your attention now. You dare not neglect them for the school-room, the counting house, or the factory. In years hence, sober historical judgment may decide that we are today living in a more explosive period of world history than that of the French Revolution.

Alfred North Whitehead, the great philosopher, said in 1933: "Man-kind is now in one of its rare moods of shifting its outlook. The mere compulsion of tradition has lost its force. It is the business of philosophers, students, and practical men to re-create and re-enact a vision of the world, conservative and radical, including those elements of reverence and order without which society lapses into riot . . . There is now no choice before us . . . We must produce a great age or see the collapse of the upward striving of our race." How much truer this is today than when spoken! You are living in a disintegrating world. It is our world, and it must be integrated if collapse is to be avoided. In a democracy this is our responsibility. What can we do about it?

Of outstanding importance, is the significance of this commencement. It implies education. We all need more of it. You--graduating today--are the chosen people of this age. Indeed, I don't believe I exaggerate when I say that only through education and educated people can a livable world be preserved. Such a world doubtless will be a compromise or balance between unbridled individual freedom or anarchy on one hand, and the total submergence of the individual in totalitarianism on the other. Education must lead to this compromise, and, in addition, must direct us individually and jointly to justice, kindness, humility, understanding, and above all, to think and thus to feel and know what is right and fair. All of these are qualities of the spirit and can be unfolded by education. Since these are abstract terms, I should like to use a very controversial present day example to make this point clear. This current situation is like Will Rogers used to say, "I only know what I read in the papers." Often one hears it said, "The next big issue is Russia--we will have to fight the Communists one of these days. Either they are right, and we are wrong, or we are right and they

are wrong." At this point many stop and urge preparation for war--or war as the only answer. This is the pattern of the past. A trained mind, an understanding mind, a judicial mind, might properly point out that this picture may present a false dilemma. Russia, as our own country and Great Britain, has everything to gain from peace. Possibly Russia's political philosophy is right for her now, as ours is for us. We may both change politically--and incidentally rapidly approach common ground from opposite directions. War, therefore, is not necessarily the only conclusion to two different types of political thinking, unless we decide it is. It is well to ponder over our changed relations with Great Britain during the last 150 years before jumping at conclusions about Russia.

The effects of education should be to alleviate and to make less critical tensions both national and international--not to aggravate them. Education should help us improve and ameliorate living, help stabilize national and world conditions. This is one of the great tasks of the future for education and for you. If this is not the main task for education and for you, what is the answer to the riddle of the future? In placing this great responsibility for the days ahead on you as educated persons and on education, I am not insensible to the weakness in present-day education. In a nutshell, it is simply this: All too much emphasis is placed on education as a diversion and a career and far too little on education as national and individual salvation.

I want to divide this problem of the days ahead into certain specific objectives at which we should all aim. First, to have the days ahead as we want them, we must cherish a love of freedom and have a clear understanding of the individual and mutual responsibilities of free people. This is the democratic creed--our way of life--a main issue too often overlooked. There are those who argue, let's have plenty of individual freedom (they

mean probably for themselves); others blindly feel if we turn all problems over to the central government everything will be well. Incidentally, it should be remembered that Beard, the historian, recently wrote: "If there are no individual or group economic interests possessing a high degree of independence as against the state, despotism will supplant constitutional government and then run its historic course."

A second objective should be the hope of a decent future by all--ourselves, as well as other people of the world--brighter hopes than those which existed in past years. A "one world" picture, if you please. This does not necessarily mean an agrarianized Germany or the Japan Commodore Perry opened to the world. Proposals made in the heat of victory may well require careful review. A Spartan peace may lead to a Pyrrhic victory, and the victory then might belong to the vanquished.

A third objective would be the development of co-operation, trust, and faith among people and among nations. The golden rule still has great power. We should aim to treat all people, wherever they live, fairly and honorably and permit them to develop (please note that word) into self-respecting nations. This does not mean sentimentalism nor charity, nor forcing culture on them; neither does it mean permitting the rapid military rise of defeated powers or the establishment of new military nations.

To win the top position among nations is a hard task; this we have achieved. To hold it and treat properly and wisely other nations is much more difficult. It is well to remember a saying by Laotzu, the Chinese philosopher, "Those who would take over the earth and shape it to their will never, I notice, succeed." If this saying with the wisdom of the ages back of it is correct, then our problem is far more difficult than making over a nation in our own image. It is training ourselves and helping others to

develop ways of life which will be in harmony, so that international and group friction will be reduced.

Fourth, it is important to avoid so far as possible prejudices of all sorts. A great historian has said that prejudices alone engage the world. Alas, there is too much truth in that statement.

A fifth objective for all of us would be the creation of a world full of opportunities, particularly for your generation. The lack of opportunity can only mean unemployment and the rapid turning of a people toward totalitarianism. Work is one of the very great blessings in life, and wide unemployment cannot exist in a healthy democratic society. This will be one of our great national issues in the years ahead.

Finally, we must accept and exercise individual as well as group responsibility and shun reliance on our central government as the one way of solving all our problems. Political prophets of any hue who promise the millennium without any personal effort on our part can only be false prophets in our democratic world. Individuals and societies become strong and self-reliant only through struggle and responsibility.

The above objectives, if achieved, will lead to better days for your generation. Moreover, they suggest the need on your part of certain intrinsic human values which you should have secured through education both in your home, as well as in this great University.

The achievement of these objectives will require you to have the philosophy of an educated man or woman as they are usually interpreted-- a person of integrity, ideas, imagination, and understanding. They require of you the ability to think independently and judicially and to educate yourself to new problems and new conditions; they will require tough-mindedness and individual courage of a high order; they require recognition on your part that you are living in a dynamic world and are willing to change as new conditions

arise and finally they stress the need for loyalty, consecration to what you believe to be right, and a pioneering spirit of the first order.

A little reflection will indicate to anyone that mankind in past years has made all too little use of the great abilities God has given us. Too often we use our talents for destructive or trivial ends, and we follow objectives void of worth. Many live the life of Mr. Worldly Wiseman in "Pilgrim's Progress," and at life's end only emptiness remains. Present world conditions should, in the days ahead, pull us like an irresistible force away from such a career, electrify our thinking and responses and turn us to a constructive life and to finer living that is more worthy of the heavens under which we live. We (all of us) must serve mankind better than we have in the past or we shall surely perish from the earth. There is no other choice before us for as Professor Whitehead said, "We must now produce a great age or see the collapse of the upward striving of our race."